

PROPHET OF THE NATION

The Solzhenitsyn Reader:

New and Essential Writings, 1947–2005

Edward E. Ericson, Jr. and Daniel J. Mahoney (ed.)

Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006

xliv+634 pp.

\$30

Reviewed by F. Roger Deolin

A few months after Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Soviet Union, the editor in chief of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* drove him to a small Swiss village for a lesson in “Western democracy.” They observed a town election meeting, with the editor acting as interpreter. To his host’s horror, several of the speakers were opposing the extension of voting rights to certain Italian residents. What impression of the Swiss would his illustrious guest carry away? The editor began apologizing for the “intolerance” of the village yokels, but Solzhenitsyn calmly reassured him: “If these people want to stay on their own and don’t accept foreigners, that’s all right with me, and you don’t have to excuse it.”

This incident encapsulates well the contrast between contemporary Western attitudes and those of the great Russian traditionalist. Our elites have long since bought into a softer version of communism—the rejection of kinship, local attachments, nationhood, and God—and are baffled by a man who has broken with such thinking altogether. As a result, some breathtakingly stupid things have been written in the Western press about Solzhenitsyn, characterizing him, e.g., as a theocrat, Russian chauvinist, and anti-Semite.

One extraneous obstacle to our understanding of the man is that the English-speaking world has often been ill-served by publishers and translators. *The First Circle*, his first novel, and still his best in the view of many critics, has only been available to us in an inadequate translation made from a version mutilated by the author in the vain hope of getting it past the Soviet censors in the 1960s. *March 1917*, his enormous novel of the downfall of the Romanovs, has been available to German and French readers since not long after its Russian

publication in 1990, but has yet to appear in our language. Many shorter works have been poorly rendered or scattered through numerous small volumes that have been allowed to go out of print.

This handsome volume from the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, therefore, fills a real need. The editors have both written books and lectured extensively on Solzhenitsyn. In the preparation of the present anthology, they have had the assistance of the author's sons, all three of whom have contributed new translations.

The book opens with a thirty-page introduction by the editors, about half of which is devoted to a biographical sketch of the author. Solzhenitsyn's own writings are divided into twelve sections, each with its own brief editorial introduction. Over a quarter of the material is new in English. There is an excerpt from "The Trail," an autobiographical work composed in verse as a mnemonic device while the author was a prisoner without access to pen and paper; he memorized twelve thousand lines in this manner, writing them down only upon his release from the Gulag. From that early period, three short poems and one short story are also new.

Solzhenitsyn's best English translator so far, by general consent, has been the late Harry Willetts of Oxford University. We learn from the present volume that he completed his version of the full ninety-six-chapter version of *The First Circle* shortly before his recent death. Awaiting its appearance, we are offered forty-four pages of selections in the present *Reader*.

Solzhenitsyn himself considers *The Red Wheel*, a series of historical novels on the Russian Revolution, to be his principal achievement. Originally intended to cover twenty critical junctures of the period 1914–1922, this proved a task beyond any single human lifetime. The project as finished includes just four novels (or "knots," in the author's terminology): *August 1914*, *November 1916*, *March 1917*, and *April 1917*. The first two have been available to us for some years in a translation by Willetts; the present *Reader* adds sixty-five pages of excerpts from the latter two. In these, Solzhenitsyn makes vivid the falsity of the common notion of a "good, democratic" March Revolution against autocracy later "betrayed" by the Bolsheviks. In fact, the Russian Revolution was from the start a savage and destructive event. He describes the murder of policemen, the burning of public archives, the looting of shops, the vain attempts by responsible men to stop the violence. The abdication and subsequent humiliation of the tsar are recounted; Lenin's followers are shown bullying wounded veterans. Everything is based on extensive archival research: As an historical novelist, he is at the opposite extreme from Alexandre Dumas, who famously called history a mere "peg on which to hang a story." Even Solzhenitsyn's fictional characters are meant to help bring alive the actual history of the Revolution.

The Solzhenitsyn Reader also includes twenty pages of excerpts from *Two Hundred Years Together*, a two volume, thousand page study of Russian-Jewish

relations from 1772 until the 1970s, initially undertaken by the author in 1990 and published in Russia in 2001 and 2002. This work has aroused some vehement responses. The president of the Russian Jewish Congress described it as “weak professionally; factually so bad as to be beyond criticism; as literature, not of any merit.” Meanwhile, certain persons assure us that the failure of a complete English translation to materialize so far is due to “the Jewish-controlled press not wanting us to read it.” I am unsure what explanation they have of our still lacking *March 1917* or a reliable *First Circle* (Russian edition: 1978).

Solzhenitsyn’s views on the history of Russian-Jewish relations should be approached within the context of his views on history and nationhood in general. In the first place, he regards history as a moral drama. *August 1914*, e.g., is peppered with sarcastic remarks about Tolstoy’s historical determinism. It would have been a dimwitted Soviet censor indeed who did not notice their application to Marxism. Passivity and fatalism are favorite targets for authorial scorn: After the heroic labors and difficult, risk-laden decisions of Prime Minister Stolypin had saved Russia from the Revolution of 1905, Tsar Nicholas II is depicted stupidly musing that “things had righted themselves somehow.” A deeply religious man, Solzhenitsyn nevertheless ridicules Christians who are inactive in the face of evil while piously telling themselves that “everything is in God’s hands.” The upshot of *The Red Wheel*, in fact, is that *Communism need never have happened*. It happened because of moral or, if you prefer, spiritual failures on the part of men in the days of the Revolution itself, and in the years leading up to it.

Solzhenitsyn, as one can see from our Swiss anecdote, also affirms the continuing value of nationhood. “Nations are the wealth of mankind, its generalized personalities,” he has written; “the least among them has its own unique coloration and harbors within itself a unique facet of God’s design.” Patriotism he describes as “an integral and persistent feeling of love for one’s homeland, with a willingness to make sacrifices for her, to share her troubles, but not to serve her unquestioningly, not to support her unjust claims, rather, to frankly assess her faults, her transgressions, and to repent for these.” The reader will find no mention of mitochondrial DNA, intelligence quotients, or cephalic index in the Russian novelist’s works. Rather, he considers patriotism “an organic, natural feeling. It requires no justification or theoretical basis.”

Nationhood, like history, he understands in moral terms. A 1973 essay included here, “Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations,” begins by declaring the legitimacy, and even inevitability, of applying “ordinary, individual, human values and standards to larger social phenomena and associations of people, up to and including the nation and the state as a whole.” He has in fact spoken this way on numerous occasions without arousing controversy. For example, while supporting independence for the Baltic states some years ago, he also noted (correctly) the essential role Latvians had played maintaining Lenin in power in the months following the October coup. I do not recall

any ensuing international furor over “Solzhenitsyn’s anti-Latvianism.” No lobby, I guess.

Two Hundred Years Together is a byproduct of *The Red Wheel*. The author inevitably encountered the “Jewish question” frequently in researching the Revolution. But he was reluctant to treat it fully in his novels, because he wished to emphasize to his mainly Russian readers their own nation’s measure of responsibility for what had befallen them. Historically, Russians have often made scapegoats of the Jews to avoid facing such considerations. After the Revolution of 1905, he writes,

the ruling circles in Petersburg were not above yielding to the temptingly simple view that there was nothing organically wrong with Russia and that the entire revolution, from beginning to end, was a malicious Jewish plot, part and parcel of a worldwide Jewish-Masonic conspiracy. Here was the root cause that explained it all: the Jews! Russia would long ago have ascended to the pinnacles of power and glory were it not for the Jews!

Solzhenitsyn holds that “it would be quite wrong to say that the Jews ‘organized’ the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, just as it was not organized by any other nation as such.” But neither were they mere victims: “the Jewish people—like all other people and like all persons—is both an active subject of history and its anguished object.” Jews, therefore, have cause not only to resent Soviet power, but also to repent for it.

He allows some validity to the common objection that Jewish Bolsheviks were renegades, i.e., not Jewish *in spirit*, but adds that “if we release ourselves from any responsibility for the actions of our national kin, the very concept of a *people* loses any real meaning.” He does not seek to declare any people answerable to *another people*—e.g., in the manner of American blacks seeking “reparations” from whites—but to summon men of all nationalities to answer to themselves, to their consciences, and before God.

It is clear Solzhenitsyn would not accept the validity of the objection that his work, though perhaps factually accurate, “might stir up anti-Semitism.” “I have never conceded to anyone the right to conceal that which *was*,” he writes.

The novel *Cancer Ward* is allotted sixty pages in this anthology, the harrowing *Gulag Archipelago* not quite one hundred. *The Oak and the Calf*, which tells the thrilling story of the author’s battle with the Communist authorities up to his expulsion from Russia in 1974, is represented here by its first chapter of fourteen pages. There is a collection of essays and speeches, most of which are either new or long out of print. The volume closes with a series of “miniatures,” or prose-poems.

The worst mistake one could make in regard to Solzhenitsyn would be to pigeonhole him as a “Soviet dissident” whose relevance is limited to the Cold War era. As noted above, our own masters have long since subscribed to a

watered-down version of Communist doctrine, and it weighs more heavily upon us with each passing year. As a consequence, Solzhenitsyn's relevance to our situation is actually increasing.

Consider, for example, his last statement to his fellow countrymen before his expulsion from the USSR: "Live Not by Lies!" (included in the present anthology). A regime based upon violence, he writes, must make use of lies because in practice it cannot use direct force against all its subjects at all times. So of the rest it requires "only a submission to lies, a daily participation in deceit." Each subject, he says, is thus faced with a clear choice: "will he remain a witting servant of the lies (needless to say, not due to natural predisposition, but in order to provide a living for the family...), or has the time come for him to stand straight as an honest man, worthy of the respect of his children and contemporaries?" If the latter, then Solzhenitsyn lists a number of practical steps he can take "from that day onward," among which are that "he...will not be impelled to a meeting where a forced and distorted discussion is expected to take place; will at once walk out from a session, meeting, lecture, play, or film as soon as he hears the speaker utter a lie, ideological drivel, or shameless propaganda."

I recall in about the 1980s seeing an explanation for American naïfs of the Soviet "closed lectures" to which Solzhenitsyn is here referring, in which apparatchiks propagandized captive audiences at their workplaces. How could free Americans be expected to understand such a thing? Today, of course, we are all familiar with mandatory sensitivity training, diversity workshops, sexual harassment seminars, etc. These, like their Soviet predecessor, serve not merely for brainwashing, but as tests of our submissiveness. If a certain critical mass of men is willing to risk their livelihoods to resist such encroachments, they will end; if not, we are in for much worse. One of the hazards of reading Solzhenitsyn is that he may make us ashamed of our own moral compromises.

*F. Roger Devlin, Ph.D., is the author of *Alexandre Kojève and the Outcome of Modern Thought*.*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]